

## What's next for Loop 202?

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The South Mountain Loop 202 appears to be cursed, destined never to be built, no matter how hard people work to make it a reality.

Designed in the mid-1980s as a way to move people and products around the Valley, it was quickly put on the back burner when funds ran low. The city of Phoenix proposed a parkway around the mountain but that was rejected by the Arizona Department of Transportation. Then some entrepreneurs attempted to generate support for a toll road, but that also fizzled.

The Arizona Department of Transportation brought the project back to life in 2001, forming a citizens advisory team to make suggestions on updating the old 1985 plan and take into account the rapid growth in Ahwatukee Foothills and on the west side in Laveen. But when the team recommended one route, based on two years of study, and ADOT director Victor Mendez chose the original 1985 route, one out of three advisory team members quit in protest.

Now, a draft plan is hung-up in negotiations, with the Gila River Indian Community representing Native American's in Arizona who say that South Mountain is sacred and that blasting deep cuts in two ridges to accommodate the 10-lane freeway through the park is wrong.

Meanwhile, the cost of the freeway has grown, from an original \$1.1 billion to at least \$2.4 billion, the latest figure released last month.

At the same time, funding for freeway construction, based upon a half-cent sales tax passed by voters, is down for the first time ever, thanks to the tightening economy. But projects slated for funding from the sales tax continue to grow, creating a \$4.5 billion shortfall.

And while ADOT doesn't build parkways, the Maricopa Association of Governments, which coordinates the Valley transportation system, has quietly begun talking about the possibility of downsizing the Loop 202 from a 10-lane freeway to a smaller parkway with limited access.

Last week, the South Mountain Citizens Advisory Team met for the last time until at least February because progress on the freeway design has stalled to the point that there is nothing to meet about.

Assuming that an agreement between the state and the GRIC can be reached, the draft Environmental Impact Statement will probably be ready for public review sometime next year. When it is finally released, ADOT said people will have 90 days to review the document and make comments. Those comments will then be reviewed before a document is presented for final public review, which probably won't be before late 2010.

But by then the project could be on life support if costs for the Loop 202 and other projects continue to escalate and revenues continue to shrink.